DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 326 868 CS 212 580

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TITLE The Religious Dimension in Recent Notable Adolescent Novels.
PUB DATE Nov 90
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (80th, Atlanta, GA, November 16-21, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Literature; Adolescents; English Instruction; Language Arts; *Literature Appreciation; Novels; Public Schools; *Religion; Religious Factors; Secondary Education; Student Reaction

ABSTRACT

A study examined notable contemporary novels published for adolescents to determine the extent of religious concerns and issues in the critical dialogue. Twenty-four novels published for adolescents on Donelson and Nilsen's Honor Listing for 1982-86 were examined. Eleven of these novels were found to have a strong religious dimension, indicating that not only is religion a significant aspect of the protagonist's milieu, but also that the protagonist is strongly involved in religious issues or situations. The religious contexts vary dramatically, including, as examples, contemporary witchcraft, Eskimo pantheism, the African "mystery tradition," and traditional Protestant and Catholic spiritual experiences. Additionally, four novels were found to have a moderate religious dimension, indicating that while religion is a significant aspect of the protagonist's milieu, the protagonist is not strongly involved in religious issues or situations. Nine novels had little or no religious dimension. These findings suggest that quality adolescent literature requires a response to the religious dimension. Literature teachers in public schools should recognize the validity and importance of religious issues in the literature as well as in the lives of their students, without promoting or denigrating specific religious orientations in their instruction. (One table containing categories of novels is included; 18 references are attached.) (KEH)

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THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION IN RECENT NOTABLE ADOLESCENT NOVELS

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Running head: THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION

Noted sociologist Robert Bellah declared that "religion is concerned with the deepest dimensions of human experience....How can we keep those issues out of the classroom without hopelessly distorting the very subject we are attempting to teach?" (cited in McNamara, 1974, p. xi). I discovered that Bellah's assertion certainly applies to the teaching of adolescent literature. I examined twenty-four notable adolescent novels published for adolescents in the 1980's and found eleven to have a strong religious dimension and four to have a moderate religious dimension, while only nine exhibited little or no religious dimension. If the sample of novels I investigated is typical--and I suspect it is--ignoring the religious dimension results in a less than complete reading of many contemporary adolescent novels of merit.

How Do You Define Religion? Or Whose Religion Do You Mean?

To talk about religion and literature in a meaningful way, you have to define religion. Interestingly, this problem has concerned sociologists and psychologists for decades. One of the most prominent approaches over the years has been to define religion functionally. Noted social pyschologists Batson and Ventis (1982) defined religion as "whatever we do to come to grips with existential questions--the questions that confront us because we are aware that we and others like us are alive and that we will die" (p. 22). Focusing on individual rather than on group aspects of religion, their definition was intended to include all the ways of dealing with existential concerns traditionally associated with the word "religion," such as belief in the supernatural and an afterlife, mystical and conversion experiences, various forms of worship, prayer, meditation, asceticism, and rules for behavior. But

they also asserted that religion included other, non-traditional forms of religious experience involved in coming to grips with the meaning and purpose of existence, such as belief in an impersonal cosmic force, focus on self-actualization, social-action rituals, and even the experience of being converted away from the religion of one's youth. Power and Kohlberg (1980) observed that religion motivates us to be moral, noting that "religion...infuses our moral sensibilities with a passion which comes from a consciousness that our moral principles resonate with the very nature of the universe" (p. 368).

Are Today's Young Adults Even Interested in Religion?

Various studies have identified an abiding interest in religious matters on the part of adolescents (Allport, Gillespie, & Young, 1948; Bezilla, 1988; Harris, 1971). According to The Gallup Study on America's Youth (Bezilla, 1988), 96% of adolescents believe in God or a universal spirit, a figure that has remained constant over the years and which parallels the level of belief among adults (95%). Dacey (1986) observed that adolescents are probably the most religiously devout of all age groups. At the same time, however, adolescence is a period of questioning, doubt, and alienation as adolescents seek to define their identities. Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi (cited in Dacey, 1986) asserted that adolescence is a period of religious awakening during which young people either become converted to a given faith or decide to abandon their childhood faith, if they have one. They suggested that the conflict between faith and reason reaches a peak at about age seventeen and is generally resolved one way or the other by age twenty. Based on his many national surveys, Gallup (cited in Shelton, 1983) asserted that while contemporary

adolescents are among the most religious segments of society, they often have difficulty with organized religion.

Is Discussing Religion in Literature Academically Legitimate?

Literary scholars have long recognized that religion plays a significant role in literature. Serious writers deal with the whole of life, including its religious or "depth dimensions" (King, 1987). R. P. Blackmur claimed that most of our best poets belong to "the great wrestling tradition" of Western Christendom and argued that Whitman, Dickinson, Eliot, Robert Lowell, Frost, and Stevens "write poetry which can be understood only if it is taken as religious" (cited in Waggoner, p. 51). Waggoner himself added that the same kind of statement could be made of many of the best prose writers as well and supported his assertion with analyses of Emerson, Melville, Twain, and Crane. Waggoner's thesis was that to ignore the religious element in the major American writers is to arrive at an inadequate interpretation of their work.

In his Natural Supernaturalism, a study of the Romantic Movement, M. H. Abrams (1971), general editor of the Norton Anthology of English Literature, asserted that Romanticism was a secularized version of traditional religious concepts and imagery and insisted that modern literary artists also adapt traditional religious elements into their works. In his view, secularization has not meant the setting aside of traditional religious ideas but merely their reformulation, and he argued that religious concepts continue to play a vital role in literature.

Writing on religion and literature for the Modern Language Association publication Interrelations of Literature, critic Giles Gunn (1982) observed that while contemporary literature and criticism often maintain a discrete

distance from orthodox religions, religious concerns and issues remain at the center of much critical dialogue. He observed that religion deals with "ideas that 'we are' rather than ideas that 'we have,' ideas so central to our existence that, while we can think in and with and through them, we can rarely think about them" (p. 50). The function of works of art, he asserted, is to help us discover what we feel about these kinds of ideas. Literary art enables us not only to address these ideas with the intellect, but also with the senses, to feel as well as to think about them. It may help us to deal with "those unspeakable experiences behind creed or conviction" (p. 49).

Do Contemporary Adolescent Novels Have Any Religion In Them?

When I first considered an extensive investigation of the religious dimension of contemporary adolescent novels of merit, I was asked, "What if those novels don't have any religion in them?" Well, functionally viewed, religion plays a major role in many of them. Of the twenty-four novels published for adolescents on Donelson and Nilsen's (1989) Honor Listing for 1982-86, I found eleven to have a strong religious dimension, indicating that not only is religion a significant aspect of the protagonist's milieu, but also that the protagonist is strongly involved in religious issues or situations. I found four to have a moderate religious dimension, indicating that while religion is a significant aspect of the protagonist's milieu, the protagonist is not strongly involved in religious issues or situations. I found nine novels to have little or no religious dimension, indicating that neither is religion a significant aspect of the protagonist's milieu nor is the protagonist strongly involved in religious issues or situations. Table 1 lists

the novels in each category. (These categories were not associated with literary quality.)

Insert Table 1 (p. 15) about here

So What Kind of Religion Do You Find in These Novels?

The religious contexts found in the eleven novels having strong religious dimensions vary dramatically, including, as examples, contemporary witchcraft in Mahy's The Changeover (1974--Published in the U.S. in 1984), traditional Eskimo pantheism in Paulsen's Dogsong (1985), the supernatural aspects of an African "mystery" tradition in Hamilton's Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush (1982), and traditional Protestantism in Fox's One-eyed Cat (1984).

Specific examples from three of the eleven novels having a strong religious dimension illustrate some of the ways the religious dimension is portrayed in contemporary adolescent fiction. Cormier's The Bumblebee Flies Anyway (1983) is set in an experimental hospital for terminally ill volunteers. The major characters constantly face death and suffering. The ultimate fact of death forces them to seek some profound way of defining themselves. The characters must deal with the temptation to give way to a sense of meaninglessness, depression, and resignation--to give way to a sense of nonbeing or nonidentity.

Barney is the central character. Death is often in his thoughts, and it forces him to ask ultimate questions. In the middle of the book, Barney meditates on a lilac bush which is dying and contrasts it to a small tree which is flowering. They cause him to reflect on death and life after death:

> Maybe there was some kind of continuity in people....Was it God? He shivered at the thought. An old prayer leaped to his lips. "Our Father, who art in heaven...." [Was] death only a sleep from which [people] eventually awakened? Not the body, of course, but the soul, soaring into eternity, joining others there. He raised his head to the sky as if he could find eternity in that endless blue. (pp. 126-127)

Later, after he has learned of his own imminent death, Barney is troubled by his thoughts--"Death meant either heaven or hell, didn't it? Heaven and hell and purgatory" (p. 199). He leaps from bed and fights off thinking.

Ultimately, Barney is unable to find meaning in the faith of his childhood. Instead he develops a personal religion which grows out of his suffering in the hospital: Having been told that he is dying and asked if he wants a priest, Barney realizes "Tempo, rhythm. That was his religion now, the religion that had been created for him by the [experimental] tests" (pp. 197-198). It becomes his prayer at the book's end: "In the name of the Tempo and the Rhythm" (p. 241), he prays.

It is in pushing the Bumblebee off the hospital roof--his grand act of service to his fellow suffers--that Barney achieves his personal experience of eternity: he never hears the Bumblebee crash: "He laughed, delighted, knowing that the Bumblebee still flew, soaring out into space, unending in its flight...out into the stars and the planets and beyond, always beautiful, always flying, always his" (pp. 240-241).

On a literal level, Mahy's The Changeover (1974--Published in the U.S. in 1984) is a romance interwoven with the supernatural. On a more profound level, teenaged Laura Chant, the protagonist, confronts identity questions

of an ultimate nature: Who is she really meant to be? What is the purpose of her life? Is she required to give her life for another? The main character, Laura learns that she is a "sensitive," human but especially aware of the supernatural realm and able to be changed over into a witch if she desires. She also learns that the only chance for her to save her brother from death is to leave behind her human identity and become a witch so she can trick the life-devouring evil spirit attacking her brother into opening himself to her power. She chooses to make the changeover.

The central event of the novel is Laura's transformation from a human to a witch. The intricate ceremony is conducted by three witches--her older male schoolmate, his mother and his grandmother--but Laura is instructed that "you are the one that must remake yourself" (p. 158). She asks if she can change back. The answer is no: "It changes you forever" (p. 158). In the midst of the ceremony, "it suddenly occurred to her she was being born again" (p. 185). As she emerges from her inward journey to a new identity, Laura asks if the changeover worked. She is given a mirror in which she sees "plainly that she was remade, had brought to life some sleeping part of herself" (p. 189). Successfully saving her brother, at the novel's end Laura still has some growing up to do, but through the changeover she has set her life in a direction from which there is no turning back.

In Paulsen's Dogsong (1985), fourteen-year-old Eskimo Russel Suskitt's search for spiritual identity and the way he is supposed to live means giving up modern Western ways and rejecting his father's Christianity. He finds his identity, purpose, "song," in the simple, natural pantheism of the primitive Eskimos.

Russel's father plays a key role in directing Russel in his quest. Russel lives with his father in a small government house in an Alaskan village on the edge of frozen wilderness. "All along the walls were pictures of Jesus. His father loved Jesus" (p. 5). Russel's father told him about Jesus: "He is the Son of God and is meant to suffer for your sins, his father said, [but it] made no sense at all to Russel" (p. 6). However, he does not say anything against his father's faith because "Jesus kept his father from drinking....And if Jesus kept that out of his life,...that was all right" (p. 6).

One day Russel, restless and unsatisfied, says to his father, "Father, something is bothering me." His father, sensing the depth of genuine unhappiness behind the words and unable to help the boy find comfort in Christianity, sends him to the mystical, aged Oogruk. Russel is shocked. "Oogruk? For help?" he asks. His father explains that "there are Oogruk's words and there is Oogruk's song. Songs and words are not the same....Sometimes words lie--but the song is always true....There is much to learn from Oogruk" (p. 11).

Following his father's suggestion, Russel turns to the ancient, blind Oogruk for his mentor. A close bond develops between Russel and Oogruk as the mystical old man trains the teenager in the ways of properly relating to the frozen northland, the old ways of the primitive Eskimos. Oogruk tells the boy that every person once had a song--not just a literal song, but a way of being, a way of properly relating to the universe--that was just for that person. "Could I get a song?" Russel asks. Oogruk replies, "You don't get songs, you <u>are</u> a song" (p. 28). Russel asks the old man to teach him how to become a song, and Oogruk agrees to do so. The old man

proves to be a wise and effective teacher, and Russel succeeds in achieving a new and fulfilling orientation to life.

Like the three novels discussed above, the other eight novels found to have strong religious dimensions portray their protagonists making profound, ultimate choices--choices that are, according to a functional definition, religious. Cormier's Beyond the Chocolate War (1985) presents strong traditional Catholic spiritual experiences as well as Archie Costello's ultimate (therefore religious) commitment to evil. In Paula Fox's One-eyed Cat (1984), young Ned Wallis, the son of a Congregational minister, works out his profound sense of guilt within a traditional Protestant context, although the resolution of his inner conflict is not resolved in a traditionally religious way. The strong religious dimension of Hunter's Cat, Herself (1986) is predominantly seen in young Cat McPhie's coming to terms with the "gift" she possesses, a supernatural ability to see into the future, a gift that more than one of her female Traveller ancestors has possessed. In Lasky's Beyond the Divide (1983), teenaged Meribah Simmons is converted away from her family's Amish religion to a Native American pantheism. The fantasy religion of McKinley's The Blue Sword (1982) involves the young female protagonist healing a fellow warrior, speaking in a language she has never learned while in a trance, and receiving guidance through visions. Also a fantasy, Pierce's The Darkangel (1982) possesses the traditional religious elements of supernatural beings, a creation story, prayer, prophecy, belief in the eternal nature of the soul, heaven, and the promise of a second coming. The Catalogue of the Universe (1986), another novel by Margaret Mahy, portrays the mixture of scientific, philosophical, and mystical

speculations of Angela May and Tycho Potter about the underlying nature of the universe and with their attempts to apply the principles they discover to their lives. The supernatural--what is called the "mystery" or "mysteries" in the book--plays a strong role in Virginia Hamilton's Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush (1982), revealing the past of Tree Spratt's family and thereby provoking events in the present.

So How Do You Handle Religion in the Public School

As in every other area of their instruction, English teachers must approach discussions of the religious dimension in works of literature with sensitivity, fairness, and personal respect for their students. They need to develop an understanding of the relationship of a functional conception of religion to adolescent psychology and the developmental tasks undertaken during adolescence. Literature and language impact students in deeply personal ways, including their moral and religious perspectives. Respecting the needs and interests of students and understanding how the study of literature may impact them requires awareness of the intellectual and psychological issues adolescents face.

English educators also need to develop the ability to recognize the religious dimensions of the literature they teach. When literature deals with profound values, moral choices, issues of identity, or supernatural activity, it may well impact the religious values of students. The tendency to put stories dealing with moral issues, supernatural activity, and religion into separate mental compartments is not uncommon, yet a functional view of religion indicates that these areas often overlap. Donelson and Nilsen (1989) suggested that one reason religious issues may

not receive their fair share of attention in the classroom is that teachers fear that in the process of building up literary sophistication they may tear down religious faith. Teaching which develops critical thinking and yet demonstrates sensitivity to varying religious perspectives is difficult but important. Modeling ways of discussing religious issues that respect religious diversity yet demand critical thinking will help develop skills and attitudes needed for life in a religiously diverse society such as the United States.

In addition, library and classroom book collections should include books from a variety of religious perspectives on a variety of subjects. Otherwise, a kind of secular censorship of religious materials may result. As Donelson and Nilsen (1989) noted, many students may prefer to devote some of their independent reading to books from religious publishing houses. Books from these sources often exhibit great variety, ranging from westerns and romances to theological and social arguments. As Krug (cited in Donelson & Nilsen, 1989) asserted, "Books should be readily available to the general public and to students on all sides of controversial issues of public importance" (p. 433), a point long made by the American Library Association.

Developing an awareness of the religious implications of literary materials used in the classroom will also help English teachers anticipate many of the objections of would-be censors. Donelson (cited in Donelson & Nilsen, 1989) observed that among the eight kinds of materials most frequently censored are materials the censors "consider irreligious or against religion or, specifically, unChristian" (p. 439). An understanding of the religious dimensions of literary works will help educators to

prepare appropriately for possible censorship and to better respond when actual objections based on religious concerns are made.

Religion and the controversies that surround it are not simply going to quietly disappear from society. In fact, contemporary scholars of religion have observed a world-wide resurgence of religion (Steinfels, 1988). In addition to the growth of many traditional religions, some 835 new religions have formed since 1940--most within the past 20 years; only 125 of these have died out and most have shown steady growth (Cornell, 1988, December 17). A full-orbed reading of quality adolescent literature requires a response to the religious dimension, but more importantly, the deep, widespread interest among many adolescents in religious issues also requires it. While literature teachers in the public schools have neither the responsibility nor the right to promote or denigrate specific religious orientations in their instruction, they should recognize the validity and importance of the religious dimension, both in the literature they teach and in the lives of their students. Such an approach will not only enrich the lives of students as individuals, but will also help them learn to deal appropriately with religious issues our pluralistic society.

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Table 1

The Religious Dimension in Notable Adolescent Novels, 1982-1986

Author	Title	U.S. Date Published
	Novels With Strong Religious Dimension	
Cormier, Robert	Beyond the Chocolate War	1985
Cormier, Robert	The Bumblebee Flies Anyway	1983
Fox, Paula	One-eyed Cat	1984
Hamilton, Virginia	Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush	1982
Hunter, Mollie	Cat, Herself	1986
Lasky, Kathryn	Beyond the Divide	1983
Mahy, Margaret	The Catalogue of the Universe	1986
Mahy, Margaret	The Changeover	1984
McKinley, Robin	The Blue Sword	1982
Paulsen, Gary	Dogsong	1985
Pierce, Meredith Ann	The Darkangel	1982
	Novels With Moderate Religious Dimension	
Fox, Paula	The Moonlight Man	1984
Fritz, Jean	Homesick	1982
Hamilton, Virginia	A Little Love	1984
Voight, Cynthia	Solitary Blue	1983
	Novels With Little or No Religious Dimension	
Brooks, Bruce	The Moves Make the Man	1984
Brooks, Bruce	Midnight Hour Encores	1986
Mazer, Norma Fox	Downtown	1984
Oneal, Zibby	A Formal Feeling	1982
Peck, Richard	Remembering the Good Times	1985
Sleator, William	Interstellar Pig	1984
Strelber, Whitley	Wolf of Shadows	1985
Thompson, Julian	A Band of Angels	1986
Voight, Cynthia	Izzy, Willy-Nilly	1986